

<crew talk>

Q: This is oral history number 415. The following oral history interview was conducted by Captain Marshall Hansen [ph?] and Chief David Jarvis [ph?] from the Naval Historical Center for the National Park Service *USS Arizona* Memorial. The interview was done at the Alamalana Hotel [ph?], Honolulu, on December 6, 2001, at 14:50. The person being interviewed is Robert Eugene Duncan, who was an electrical mate, third class, on the *USS Tennessee* on December 7th in 1941. Are all of those facts correct?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Yes.

Q: For the record, please state your full name, place of birth, or birth date.

Robert Eugene Duncan: Robert Eugene Duncan.

Q: Place of birth?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Uh.. Portsmouth, Ohio.

Q: And your date of birth?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Uh.. <laughs> I won't... oh, boy, I tell you, that's not-- September the 10th, 1922. That's so many dates.

Q: You're only a day older than me. I was born on September 11th.

Robert Eugene Duncan: Is that true?

Q: What did you consider your hometown in 1941?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Portsmouth, Ohio.

Q: What were your parents' names?

Robert Eugene Duncan: William Clifton Duncan, and Ethel Duncan.

Q: Okay. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Robert Eugene Duncan: I had one brother.

Q: Where did you go to high school?

Robert Eugene Duncan: In Portsmouth, Ohio.

Q: Where and why did you enlist?

Robert Eugene Duncan: All my life, I was gonna be in the Navy, and I had never put anything else in a big priority over it. My father was in the Navy... uhm.. seemed like all the relatives in my family was in the Navy, and I had to be, so I joined.

Q: Now, were your father or any of the relatives career...?

Robert Eugene Duncan: No, no.

Q: No, they just were in for a short period of time?

Robert Eugene Duncan: They went uh.. well, they were in, probably most of 'em, World War I.

Q: Okay. So where did you enlist?

Robert Eugene Duncan: In Portsmouth, Ohio.

Q: Portsmouth Ohio?

Robert Eugene Duncan: I'd sworn in in Cincinnati.

Q: Okay, and what month and year was that?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Uh.. September the 16th, 1940.

Q: You went to boot camp up at Great Lakes?

Robert Eugene Duncan: No, I went to Norfolk, Virginia.

Q: Norfolk boot camp. And what were your feelings about that experience?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Well, other than being homesick, uh.. <laughs> it was all right. It never bothered me, like a lot of them. Guys alongside of me, they had a hard time adjusting, I guess.

Q: Okay. When you completed boot camp, where were you ordered to next?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Uh.. the *Tennessee*-- *USS Tennessee*-- and it was stationed in uh.. Long Beach--

Q: Okay.

Robert Eugene Duncan: At that time.

Q: As an electrician mate, did you get any specialized training, or was it on the job?

Robert Eugene Duncan: No, it was on the job.

Q: So you went aboard the *Tennessee*. Someone from the EM gang [ph?] pulled you aside, started teaching you what to do?

Robert Eugene Duncan: No, it wasn't that simple. I had to go in th- the third division at gunnery.

Q: Okay.

Robert Eugene Duncan: <clears throat> One of the turrets. And then I requested E-division [ph?], and uh.. th- I was told at the time, probably wouldn't be uh.. an opening. But about a week later, I did get uh.. transferred to the E-division. Uh.. and then it was up to me. I had to-- see, at that time, they had... oh, a lot of books to read, and what they called practical factors-- different phases of electrical work on the ship. And I was uh.. I guess a pretty good student, and I grabbed right on it. <laughs>

Q: Great. So what day did you report in to the *Tennessee*?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Uh.. it was in November, but I don't remember the date.

Q: So November 1940?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Forty.

Q: And at the time, the *Tennessee* was still in Southern California?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Yeah, Long Beach.

Q: Long Beach. Can you give us a little idea of what the cruises were like when the *Tennessee* was still in Long Beach?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Well, uh.. we'd go out periodically for different drills, I suppose. Uh.. they had gunnery drills on the Cyclomany Islands [ph?], and then uh.. oh, at night, torpedo attacks, and from destroyers and uh.. stuff like that. And then uhm.. I wasn't really in any position to know too much about it, being a r- uh.. a boot, but I was very curious. <laughs> But uh.. what they done, I got a-- they-- other than the firing of guns.

Q: Now, in E-division [ph?], what type of equipment were you working on during this period?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Well, s- uh.. in that time, I was in what they called the lighting shop. Uh.. we took care of all the lighting on the ship, and uh.. basically that was it. There was several guys that was assigned to that. We had a chief in charge. And uh.. we had to keep the uh.. lights on at night, and basically that's what it was.

Q: Okay. Did you work in any other of the shops be--

Robert Eugene Duncan: Oh, yes. Later, I got uh.. what they call the "main drive shop." That was the uh.. the main uh.. turbines and the alternators and the light-and-power generators that supplied everything else. And uh.. I studied for that, and uh.. that's when I started making my rates.

Q: Let's move ahead, and we're going to take a look-- the first day we want to look at is December 6th, the Saturday before the attack. Do you remember what you were doing on that day?

Robert Eugene Duncan: I don't remember what during the day, but I remember very well that evening. Uh.. me and uh.. another guy, who's topside, standing on the uh.. I guess, a foksile [ph?], looking out across the *West Virginia* that was along the side of us, uh.. watching uh.. the PT [ph?] boats going out on patrol. And we were talking about the weather and stuff like that, and uhm.. what a bummer it was we had to go down below deck, and there wasn't any air. The *West Virginia* tied up along the side and knocked off all the air that came in through the portholes. So that was a basic uh.. conversation we had that time.

Q: Now, were you on a duty section?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Not that time, no.

Q: So you had the choice. You could've gone ashore or stayed on the ship, and it was just--

Robert Eugene Duncan: Well, n-- I don't know. Uh.. see, they had it broken up into four different liberty sections. Uh.. usually, one section at time, and that was <inaudible>-- you don't go ever stay in Honolulu then. You didn't go every day.

Q: Okay. So...

Robert Eugene Duncan: Because uh.. third class, I made uh.... I think \$60 a month at that time. So it didn't go too far.

Q: So three sections stayed aboard, one section--

Robert Eugene Duncan: And one section went as- ashore.

Q: Okay. Moving ahead to December 7th, can you tell us where and what you were doing before the attack, and what made you aware of it, and what action you started to take?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Well, at the time, well, that day, I-- it was a regular routine to be on a Sunday. Uh.. they didn't have any basic things to do. It was uh.. what they call a holiday routine. And I had just uh.. well, a little later in the morning, had breakfast, and was setting at the mess table, and uh.. all at once, the- the alarm went off for general quarters. All hands met on my understation [ph?], and I didn't hear-- they always said they s- said, "This is a drill. This is no drill," but I <inaudible> don't remember hearing that. All I know is, "Go to your battle station," and I did, by the shortest possible route. Well, that was the after engine room, and I had to go about uh.. oh, I don't know, 150 feet aft, and then down... I don't know, let's say two levels, to the engine room. And uh.. course, there's a lot of confusion, and everybody going, but everybody was uh.. trying to get to that station there. So... so uh.. we went down and uh.. they had the guys on the uhm.. sound-powered phones notify the bridge, or whoever, that we're on station, and... so the next thing you know, they're closing in the watertight doors that you just went through-- uh.. what they call the condition Zed [ph?]. That's the ultimate watertight thing. Well, when you're in that condition, the only communication you have is through these sound-powered phones with the uh.. topside, or whoever that's conducting 'em, and we couldn't find out anything. Uh.. they was telling us that uhm.. different ships were sunk, the *Arizona* blew up, and we didn't believe it... because uh.. the uh.. smoke and everything started

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coming down in the vents. Oh, boy... that heavy oil smoke, you know? So we took turns going down in the bilges that are below deck, and they were... with rags, was soaking it up so we could <laughs> keep <inaudible> clear. And uh.. finally, they uh.. gave orders like, "We're getting underway." Well, we couldn't figure that out, because-- well, later you find out different things. But anyway, we started to <inaudible> fired up those end [ph?] generators and the bain [ph?] engine, and the screws was turning and everything. It was found out later, that was to keep the fire away from the *Arizona*. So uh... the ship was.. oh, jumping or moving or some-- pretty rick-- uh.. hairy. I don't know why I'm getting uh.. so emotional. Uh.. then uh.. after a while, they-- I guess they kept the engines running all day to uh.. keep that fire back. Well, the stern of the *Tennessee* caught fire from the fuel and fire from the *Arizona*. See, we're only uh.. well, you've been out there. How close uh.. probably wasn't 25 feet in distance. But uhm.. I never got topside. I didn't really know what happened until about seven o'clock that evening. But we finally got up to-- they let us go out. They opened the watertight doors. And uh.. about the time I got topside, these uh.. three planes off of the *Enterprise* came in over the harbor, I guess, to find out what was going on. Wrong time. They got shot down. And that was enough for me to head back down in the engine room. <laughs> I was... we'll wait. So then it was a case of uh.. waiting for getting relieved, to eat, take showers, and uh.. change clothes. Then they went on a four-hour on, four-off-- four-hour off routine for duty. But uh.. then eventually we got to go back to our living quarters, and that's where all the rumors were about getting some-- getting all that. It was quite a day, I guess.

Q: Now, in conditions that-- or when I was in the Navy, condition Zebra, as they called it then-- they're always changing the phonetic alphabet-- you were in a situation where you couldn't even go through the scuttle without permission from the officer of the deck.

Robert Eugene Duncan: That's right.

Q: And probably under general quarters, and realistically, the X.O. [ph?] or a captain.

Robert Eugene Duncan: Yeah, you're uh.. you j- can't do anything. You're sealed in, and uh.. that's the ultimate <inaudible>.

Q: Now, later, when you went up to the weather decks, did they stand down that condition, or did you get permission to go through the scuttles?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Uh.. they could've gone to condition yoke [ph?] to allow you to open so many-- there were certain doors that was involved in that. So they could uh.. could have gone from Z to Y, which was yoke, so you could uh.. get topside. It was a very limited number of doors that they would do that, 'cause they were still under a little pressure, I guess.

Q: Now, I seem to remember that the Tennessee did take a bomb forward.

Robert Eugene Duncan: Yeah. The uh.. center gun of the number-one turret was hit, and split. Uh.. I guess there's two or three layers of that steel dropped off. And then on the uhm.. number-three turret, I think it was-- the high one-- took a direct hit. It was a naval shell-- I think they said a 12-inch-- that went through the- the armor of the top of the turret, and it didn't explode; it just broke apart and burned. And uh.. I think that was where most of the wounded were, in that turret.

Q: Now, after engineering, did you feel any of that?

Robert Eugene Duncan: No, not really. It was just a little quiver now. You couldn't tell whether the-- where the screws were turning and--

Q: There was so much noise, you couldn't even hear the explosion.

Robert Eugene Duncan: Yeah, and then the uh.. the smoke and all that coming in the vents, and that went on for quite a while before they uh.. actually turned the vents off.

Q: How long was it before you heard about the bombs striking the ship?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Probably that evening. It's when I went topside.

Q: A little bit of a surprise, huh?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Yeah.

Q: Okay. Now, it was several days before the *Tennessee* could be moved, and my understanding is they actually had to explode part of the quay, to where you could ease out and forward, because the *West Virginia* was basically pinning you in.

Robert Eugene Duncan: Well, that, yes, and then the uh.. *Maryland* was forward of us. They had to move the *Maryland* so we could slide out. <laughs> Uh.. that was quite complicated, but they had to explode that uh.. blow that up, that quay.

Q: So did you get to watch any of that, or...?

Robert Eugene Duncan: No. When you're in the engineering room, see nothing. <laughs> It's all here. You just uh...

Q: So for the next couple of days, you were standing watch and saving the ship.

Robert Eugene Duncan: Yeah, they uh.. they took- took us over to Navy yard from there, and all these hoards, it seemed like, yard workers came along there, and they're welding and everything, and all the stern was all ready to fall off, I guess, from the fire. And uh.. I was topside then. I don't really remember that. And we got uh.. I remember I could go uh.. off of the ship, and I went down to that dry dock where the _____ and the *Pennsylvania* were. Well, somebody told me that there was trouble down there, so I went down, and I was amazed at how that blew up, and I, "What a mess." And uh... I don't know exactly how long we were there while they made these repairs. But I was topside when they said, "Attention: All yard workers leave the ship immediately." And they kept repeating it. And then all the yard workers was trying to pick up their welding hoses and torches and all that stuff and throw 'em off on the dock. And then uhm.. the uh.. *Pennsylvania* and the *Maryland* and the *Tennessee* went out the harbor, heading for Bremerton [ph?]. Well, the *Pennsylvania* went to uh.. San Francisco, I think. But we went on to uh.. Bremerton. And we were at sea. Uh.. we remember Christmas, and uh.. water was running down the third-deck passageway. They- then they was trying to pump it out, then they was-- and it wasn't- wasn't a very good feeling, you know? You might sink at sea after getting out of that mess.

Q: And this is seawater running down that passageway?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Yeah, from the stern, where the... the rivets and all that was, I- I assume. I'm-- now, I don't make it plain-- I uh.. this-- a lot of this stuff, I didn't see. I was in a position where I couldn't see. I was in the engine room, basically, and- and uhm.. when we got the... over Christmas, they- they had the Christmas dinner and stuff like that-- best they could. And I can't remember when we got into Bremerton, but I know that they passed the prettiest stern word: "Don't say anything about what was sunk, what was damaged. Let's just freeze it. Don't say anything." Well, that was all right. But they forgot a lot of those Bremerton yard workers had brothers on there, and family and all that, and boy, was we under pressure, especially when I had the duty to stay on there. <laughs> That was something. So uh.. we went uh.. we were there... <signs> I don't know, maybe uh.. three or four weeks, and they done some more repairs, and.. and we went down to San Francisco and stayed there for a while. Now, that was during the Battle of Midway and Coral Sea in that time period. So uh.. we must've been in pretty good shape then, 'cause we would go to sea, that- for the Battle of Midway, we were a backup-- you know, the second line. And then we'd come back in. But I guess that gave the... whatever department they were working on plans for the remodeling, because when we got back to Bremerton, they stripped that thing right down to nothing. Just the hull was there, and they put new... oh, uh.. what was it... uhm.. what am I trying to say? Alternators, and uh.. took all the turbines apart and redone 'em, and in other words, it was just like a new ship when we went out of there nine months later.

Q: Now, you said you were the second line of defense at Midway.

Robert Eugene Duncan: Yeah, as far as I know.

Q: When you went to Midway, did you sail out of San Francisco, or did you return to Pearl Harbor and then go up to Midway?

Robert Eugene Duncan: No, we came out of uh.. S-San Francisco. Came back to San Francisco.

Q: And then up to Bremerton [ph?]?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Mm-hmm. That was a certain time period. I don't know. But when we went to Bremerton, evidently they- they meant business, 'cause they tore that whole superstructure down, re-- changed the whole thing. Actually took uhm.. uh.. decks off. The third deck... there was one side-- the second deck. They added four inches more of armor plate. And that was something. <laughs> <inaudible> was that thing.

Q: They wanted that extra protection.

Robert Eugene Duncan: Well, I guess later it came in handy over in the Philippines and around, but I wasn't on there then.

Q: So what ship did you go to after the *Tennessee*?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Well, I went to Washington, D.C., to interior communications school.

Q: Oh, okay. Now, in those days, did they have the <inaudible>, or was that another job for the electrical mates?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Well, that was a-- you took-- it was uh.. telephones and uh.. sound-powered equipment and stuff like-- uh.. what am I thinking-- this is-- <laughs> these terms they got now, the kids... what do they call it? But anyway, I was transferred from there to Mobile, Alabama, and I got on a repair ship.

Q: And what was the name of the repair ship?

Robert Eugene Duncan: *Bureus* [ph?]. *USS Bureus*, AG-69 [ph?]. And I stayed on there... <sighs> oh, let's see. We went from <inaudible> and Mobile, and I took <inaudible> and back in Pearl Harbor. I think it was about a couple of years. Had to be. And then uh.. from there, I went to uh.. <inaudible>.

Q: When you brought the repair ship into Pearl Harbor for decommissioning, was that about the next time you had seen Pearl after the attack?

Robert Eugene Duncan: No. Well, the *Tennessee* was in and out of there bef-- I'd say-- I stayed on the *Tennessee* until 1944.

Q: Okay.

Robert Eugene Duncan: So we uh.. they got--

Q: You were in and out of there a couple of times on the *Tennessee*.

Robert Eugene Duncan: Yeah.

Q: So how did you feel returning to Pearl Harbor in the *Tennessee*?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Well, it was uh.. well, the fires was out and all that. Then it was real weird, because the *Arizona*-- the uh.. mainmast was flipped over, you know, the- the forward end of it, where, like, it broke off, and that stayed that way for a couple years, I guess. But uh.. no, it never felt the same, 'cause I had uhm.. two guys that I joined with-- well, three-- were on the *Arizona*. And two of 'em didn't make it. So uh.. but my first uh.. while we were there, a- after the attack, the- the *Enterprise* came in, and I uh.. Halsey [ph?] was the admiral, and I guess he had everybody topside to salute. The uh.. I guess they still do that when they go by the *Arizona*.

Q: Yep. She's still a commissioned vessel.

Robert Eugene Duncan: Yep.

Q: Now going back to pre-December 7th days, you talked about how there were four liberty section, one who was uh.. ashore on liberty, one that had the duty, and then I presume two that were on board but didn't have the duty then.

Robert Eugene Duncan: Well, yeah. Only uh.. uh.. I cannot-- I don't remember now how that worked, but the-- I know that if you got-- you just had routine, general routine, what the... well, it wasn't a holiday routine, because you had certain duties to do anyway, and you _____

when they had none of 'em, even though uh.. this one guy miss, and you know people's ashore.

Q: But it was holiday routine, where you didn't really have--

Robert Eugene Duncan: Well, guys went ashore to play ball and _____ golf and tennis or whatever. And uh.. that's why a lot of 'em got caught in their football suits and their... <laughs> and golf and tennis. It was uh.. and they had church services. A lot of guys were getting ready to go to church.

Q: Now, did they have church service right on the *Tennessee*?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Uh, yes.

Q: So they were preparing for church service just before the attack. Was that out on the fantail, or...?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Uh... I don't know where-- I-- yes. Sometimes it was there. They had a regular service for non-denominational. You know, it was...

Q: Now, I imagine with a battleship, you were actually large enough to have a chaplain on board, weren't you?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Yes.

Q: But if you were on board on a normal Sunday-- not the 7th; that was a different situation-- how would you spend your holiday routine? What type of activities, such leisure activities would you do, if you had the spare time but you weren't allowed ashore?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Well, right on the ship, you were uh.. free to-- you could read, you could uh.. just sunbathe, lay around. Uh.. usually a lot of guys would bring magazine or papers back with 'em, you know? You could do that. And just generally, just what you would do at home-- nothing. If you wanted to go uh.. course, you couldn't go ashore, but I don't know. You just stand

around the railing and everything. It was kind of a, what- what you say, a happy time. I <inaudible> think. <laughs>

Q: Now, when I was on active duty, each ship had what they called a gee [ph?] dunker. You familiar with that term?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Yes. Oh, yeah.

Q: So...

Robert Eugene Duncan: Ice cream?

Q: Yep. Yep. So the Tennessee had a gee dunk and--

Robert Eugene Duncan: Ah, the gee dunk stand and uh.. and the small stores, and uh.. well, they had uh.. one of the guys in A-division had a uh.. you could buy a block of vanilla ice cream that he sold out a lot of the money <inaudible> anything about it, he done. <laughs> And that was something to look forward to.

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Q: I presume, Navy traditions, you had coffee messes and-- course, in our days, you had canned pop [ph?] messes, as well.

Robert Eugene Duncan: Yeah, we--

Q: Some entrepreneurs on board that were running their own little businesses.

Robert Eugene Duncan: Well, no, not too much on that, though. We had uh.. the coffee uh... no, that- that was the only guy. Uh.. that's-- he's still his name. He just died not too long ago, but made the ice cream, and then the gee dunk stand.

Q: Okay. Great.

Robert Eugene Duncan: And that was uh.. a root beer float beer was the main thing then.

Q: Chief, do you have any other questions?

Chief: Just a quick one on the day of the attack. When you were in the engine room, you couldn't hear any of the sounds of the explosions?

Robert Eugene Duncan: No.

Chief: Was there any... on the sound-powered phones, were people relaying what was happening, what they could see above?

Robert Eugene Duncan: Well, they were telling us.

Chief: Telling you, okay.

Robert Eugene Duncan: But we weren't believing this.

Chief: You weren't believing it.

Robert Eugene Duncan: Now, there was one fellow on there-- I want to get this in here-- by the name of uh.. Champ Adamson [ph?]. He was a champion heavyweight wrestler of the fleet, and nobody believed anything until Champ Adamson came back as- aboard. He was-- spent the night. He was married and had a family over there, I guess. But when they said, "Champ Adamson said," well, it's like that commercial: Everybody listens. And when Champ Adamson said all these ships were sunk and were damaged and everything, well, then they kind of woke up. They believed it.

Q: Yeah. _____ authoritative source. Well, thank you for sharing your ex--

Robert Eugene Duncan: Well, I hope I didn't get carried away there.

Q: Oh, no. I appreciate the experience you shared, and thank you for serving our country.

Robert Eugene Duncan: Oh, thank you.

<crew talk>

End of Tape 414 Robert Eugene Duncan